

## ARTICLE

# The English Way to Italian Socialism: The PCI, 'Red Bologna' and Italian Communist Culture as Seen through the English Prism

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This contribution analyses the British perception of Red Bologna during the seventies and eighties, when politicians in the UK thought of Bolognese Social-Democrats as an example of good government. Maccaferri investigates the way in which the British political debate and the intellectual public discourse (as seen in journals, pamphlets and books) 'imported', deconstructed, adapted and appropriated the Italian communist model. The aim is to cast light on an 'Italy Made in Britain' that was constructed in the prevalently left-wing British political debate between the mid-nineteen seventies and the late nineteen-eighties, namely until Italian Communism started to search for a new name and a new identity, and, indeed, it liquidated the model itself. This article considers the debate expressed in the pamphlet *Red Bologna* (eds Max Jäggi, Roger Müller, Sil Schmid, 1977), journals such as *Power and Politics* and *The New Left review*, and newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. Furthermore, it focusses on the resurgence of leftist intellectuals. It deals primarily with Marxism Today's Italian discourse. By focusing on such a view, Maccaferri reconstructs the way in which, whilst engaging with the Thatcherite period, the English political debate and intellectual discourse perceived and constructed a very different kind of Italy that was simultaneously revolutionary and communist in its ideology and 'moderate' and socialist – if not liberal – in its policies.

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## 1. Introduction

Intellectual ties and cultural interactions linking Italy with Britain and projecting Italian culture and history across English cultural scenarios have emerged since the Renaissance, later crystallising in the eighteenth-century quasi-mass phenomenon of the Grand Tour and continuing until recent years, although latterly predominantly focusing on the peculiarities of Italian politics. The image of Italy portrayed in all these accounts has often emphasised a romantic view of Italian art and culture. How Britain perceives and imagines Italy and consequently how it mirrors itself in Italy's image has attracted extensive scholarly attention (see Chaney 1998 and Black 2003). While Anglo-Italian cultural and political relations have been widely studied, this attention has often been restricted to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel and literary writing or the *Risorgimento* and Liberal Italy (see Pii 1984; Riall

2013; Yarrington, Villani, Kelly 2013; Bacchin 2014; Pellegrino Sutcliffe 2014); today's Italian politics and recent history, on the other hand, have been the subject of incessant journalistic interest, culminating in a relentless curiosity about 'Berlusconism', which is now a fully fledged British literary subcategory (Ginsborg 2004; Andrews 2005; Stille 2006; Shin 2008; Mammone, Veltri 2010; Emmott 2012 and Emmott, Piras 2012; Dickie 2013; Jones 2013; Albertazzi, Newell 2015).

On the other front, Italy has often looked at England as a political paradigm in terms of its institutions, or as a champion of liberalism and progress. In the early years after Italian unification, for instance, a marked Anglophilia was part of the political culture of the Liberal ruling classes, and the fact that the British example was viewed as unreachable and unapproachable transformed the Westminster model into a 'mirror of ideology', a sort of ideal projection for society and institutions (see Cerasi).

Starting from this background, it is therefore pertinent to reconstruct a recent moment when the usual circumstances were completely inverted, with the British looking at Italian experience as a potential political and cultural model to be imported and adapted to the homeland context. The moment in question engages with the transformations and contradictions of the Thatcherite period, when British left-wing intellectuals, searching for a viable alternative to the status quo, looked at the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano or PCI), and especially the experience in Bologna and the Emilian region's communist local governments more generally. The version of Italy that these intellectuals perceived and refabricated between the late 1970s and early 1980s was at the same time revolutionary and communist in its ideology but tolerant and social-democratic (if not liberal-democratic) in its policies and governance.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of British political history, apart from the case of the link between the British Union of Fascists and Italian Fascism (see Baldoli 2004: 147–61 and Blinkhorn 2013: 60–2), this was one of the 'very rare chances' for the Labour Party as well as for British left-wing intellectuals to seek inspiration from an 'overseas' model (Sassoon 1997: 889).

The narrative of this utopic Italy corresponded to a horizon of expectations more than to reality. Initially inspired by the publication of a journalistic inquiry on the communist experiment in the Emilia-Romagna region, the interest lasted for a short, though very influential, period. By the late 1980s, the PCI was engulfed in a period of ideological transformation culminating in the rejection of communism, the dissolution of the party, a new name and a new identity – de facto (self-)liquidating its own model. Simultaneously, British left-wing public discourse and the various intellectual souls of the Labour Party also went in other directions, forgetting Red Bologna and Emilia's model.

Today's Italy attracts international attention for a variety of reasons, not only confined to exposing clichés and stereotypes. By casting light on a peculiar but positive image of Italy, and by identifying its continuities and discontinuities, this article contributes to understanding the representation and reception of political and cultural features beyond national boundaries, and their participation in the construction and reproduction of meaning and values.

## 2. Red Bologna: Between perception and reality

In 1977, the Swiss-German journalists Max Jäggi, Roger Müller and Sil Schmid published their book *Red Bologna* in Britain (the Swiss edition had been printed the previous year). This journalistic inquiry, prefaced in the English version by a vibrant introduction by Donald Sassoon titled 'Italy today: a society in transition', recalled the experience of the Swiss authors. Having gone to Bologna in 1974 to cover the story of the neofascist train bomb attack (*Italicus*, 4

<sup>1</sup> See Pridham 1981 (especially 1–26); Richards 1996.

August 1974; see Ginsborg 1990: 348–405), they ended up spending ten months there and writing an enthusiastic report of what they portrayed as the ‘model city renowned throughout Europe for its efficient and humane administration’ (Jäggi, Müller, Schmid 1977). The book sang the praises of the achievements of the communists who were at the helm of the Municipality of Bologna and had been ruling the city and the region since the end of the Second World War. In a period when ‘everywhere urban problems ha[d] become acute’, Bologna and ‘its declared policy of democratic and decentralized government’ represented a virtuous example of effective collaboration between the civic and political aspects of a modern community, between ideology and governance. What most fascinated the Swiss journalists was that this ‘special relationship’ between communism and democracy was at the same time ‘revolutionary’ (Jäggi, Müller and Schmid 1977; especially ch. 5 “Consumer Policy: An Economy Planned for the Customers”, pp. 95–110; ch. 7 “Social policy: Away with Charity, Away with Ghettos”, pp. 133–158; ch. 9 ‘The Old: Independence not Institutions’, pp. 175–186.

Bolognese and more broadly Emilian communism had been seen in Britain and in other European countries as a textbook example of ‘good government’ (*buongoverno*) since the 1960s (see Baldissara 1994: 225–82 and Sassoon 1997: 888–90). As early as 1963, Richard West wrote in *New Statesman* that ‘Bologna is famous for cooking and Communism’ – the English flirting with Italian food is well known (see Ecker 2008: 307–22) – and in the same article, titled ‘Red Bologna’, he added:

The Council is proud, and with some justification, of the planned growth of Bologna [...]. Besides houses and schools, it has encouraged those community centres (*casa del popolo*) which are a feature of Left-wing life in Italy. It has introduced the division of all the town into districts [...] which will advise on local government and encourage political consciousness – especially communist consciousness. (West 1963: 860)

At the core of the communists’ political inventiveness and crucial for Bologna’s *buongoverno* were the welfare policies (health services, nurseries and prep-schools) that the Emilian PCI had implemented since the 1950s. Welfare services expanded far more rapidly than in any other cities, to the extent that Bologna’s administrators could boast that 90–95% of Bolognese 3–6 year olds now had a nursery place, as the *Guardian* noted in 1976.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, according to the British press and the Swiss journalists’ examination, it was the urban planning and the philosophy of decentralisation with which the city had made a name for itself that encapsulated the Bolognese miracle; for instance, as the *Guardian* highlighted: ‘In contrast to Moscow’s centralisation – this [approach] is applied at the decision-making level by the city’s 18 district councils [*i quartieri*]’.<sup>3</sup>

Bologna’s famous urban planning was based on two main pillars: the conservation of the historical city centre architecture, which is exceptionally expansive for a medium-sized city such as Bologna, and the implementation of publicly owned housing to offset the real estate speculation that had escalated in other Italian cities. What the British public might not have been aware of at that time was that the creator of the project, who had the intuition to subdivide the urban area into neighbourhoods, was an architect, Osvaldo Piacentini, who had drafted the plan for Giuseppe Dossetti, the right-wing Christian Democratic Party’s candidate for Bologna’s mayoral elections in 1956. Dossetti lost the elections, but the reconfirmed communist mayor on his new mandate decided to enforce Piacentini’s proposals (see Maccaferri ‘Osvaldo Piacentini’ and ‘I partiti politici’ 630–6; Tesini). Without delving into the

<sup>2</sup> ‘Italy goes to the polls,’ *Guardian*, 18 June 1976, p. 15. (See Abbott, Nutbrown 2001; Vampa 2014: 473–91 and Troilo 2013).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Italy goes to polls,’ p. 18.

historical specificities of Dossetti's electoral campaign against the 'legendary' communist mayor Giuseppe Dozza, who had made the Stalingrad of Italy into a model-city for its social policies, it should be added that Dossetti's manifesto, *Il libro bianco per Bologna*, represented a pioneering and powerful example of administrative governance and local politics. The manifesto was the product of a team of young intellectuals who were coordinated and led by the sociologist Achille Ardigò. The main core of their project revolved around the implementation of more rational governance captured in the idea of a 'civic consortium'. Section 2 of *Il libro bianco per Bologna* envisioned a planning policy through a long-term expansion of the peripheries and, by exploiting an old but never before enforced law, it created the 'citizen's popular conventions' and implemented a further intermediate level of political representation (see Boselli 2009: 61–251). The re-elected Dozza's council adopted this proposal, thus starting the first of a series of successful social and urban experiments that were later integrated in the national law no. 278 of 1976 on decentralisation and citizens' participation in the municipal administration (see Ceccarelli, Galligani 1984).

In addition to urban planning, the 'exceptionality' of Bolognese communism and the famous Red Belt mainly lay in its economic planning, or more broadly in the 'harmonious' relationship between 'capital and labour', to use the words of the British discourse on Emilian communism. The economist Sebastiano Brusco of the University of Modena would later systematise the so-called 'Emilian model', in the 1980s. He directed some research on small and medium-sized engineering companies in collaboration with FIOM (the metalworkers' union) from which he extrapolated an influential article published in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. Brusco's analysis underlined the interaction between the productive structure, the labour market and the main political institutions in Emilia-Romagna. He concluded that cultural as well as economic factors emphasise the freer role played by market forces and the authentically capitalist character of Emilia-Romagna's development as compared with other Italian regions. At the same time, however, he stated that a harmonious mixture of discordant elements was achieved in Emilia: efficient institutions, notwithstanding the Italian historical 'absence of the state', blended with vigorous trade union activity (see Brusco; and Rinaldi). The shared vision that this system was rich in opportunities for all, and that everyone was ultimately the master of his/her own fate, were the pivotal elements of the political consensus enjoyed by the PCI, which drove and controlled the development process (see Magagnoli; and Maccaferri 'Spostare avanti' 353–60).

Brusco's economic analysis remained mostly confined to an academic readership, but, as I have already mentioned, the theme of the difference of the Emilian communists was not new in the English political debate. What is interesting and atypical here is that, on the one hand, this discourse rarely displays the classically Byzantine features of Italian politics (i.e. bureaucratic inefficiency, client-based centralisation, corruption and nepotism). For *The Economist*, for example, 'the Communist region of Emilia-Romagna has become something of a show-piece for clean administration'.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, in a 1972 article titled 'It's Red for respectable', the *Guardian* had also written:

While Communism in Sicily may be the last resource of the helpless workers [...] in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna it marches with a confident step. The centre of Bologna seems to show bourgeois life at his best. The paradox of Bologna is that it has been governed by the Left, the Communist Party and the Socialist party since the end of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'The red belt grows longer', *The Economist*, 21 June 1975, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> C. Page, 'It's Red for respectable', *Guardian*, 25 April 1972, p. 3.

On the other hand, what gained the attention of the British press and commentators was the fact that such extraordinary economic development had taken place in a context of supposed 'real' communism. 'Many Right-wing Bolognese – the *New Statesman* stated in 1963 – vote for the Communist list in local elections because they think Communists run the city well' (West 860). More cutting was *The Spectator*:

In Emilia, for instance, a region particularly affected by the economic boom, a good number of small craftsmen and even ordinary workers have succeeded in becoming the proprietors of medium-sized concerns in a very short time. Many of the new bosses saw the advantage of keeping their PCI cards for the practical benefits involved. Thus, they increase their bargaining power with Italy's largest trade union which is under Communist control, and get a better deal with the local public administration which again is Communist-dominated. (Scimone 1965: 357)

The argument around Emilia-Romagna's level of 'redness' contains three incongruities that acted at the same time as strengths. First, Italian communism by its own nature differed from Soviet communism and from other forms of communism in Western Europe because it found its own legitimation in the national history bound to the resistance struggle and the construction of liberal-democratic republican institutions. In short, Italian communism was 'patriotic' and 'nationalist' at the same time. *The Spectator* had documented this in 1951:

[I]n Emilia Communism is deeply ingrained. It does not appeal merely to the dispossessed, being strongest among the prosperous peasants around Bologna, the provincial capital. It is a 'tough' province, and it had one of the strongest anti-Fascist movements in all Italy. (Ashcroft 1951: 237)<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, compelled by the so-called *conventio ad excludendum*, excluding it from the government of the country and pervaded by its rigid public and political ethics, the Italian communism that managed to 'get into office' in local administrations such as Bologna was seen as a sort of anomaly within the political system: a party and a political and cultural tradition that were 'alien' to the Italian anthropological 'character' because of their efficiency, honesty, morality without being moralistic, and on and so forth (see Pasquino 69–94). At the same time – and here is the third contradiction that aroused the greatest surprise in the British imaginary – Emilian communism appeared to work well because it was no longer an orthodox communism but rather an 'updated', new (or 'third') way towards socialism: in short, not a 'red' Bologna but a 'light red' or 'pink' Bologna. In industrial and economic terms – as the *Guardian* stated, for instance – the communists' policy was 'to favour a mixed economy with public cooperatives and private industry'. This position on the policy of nationalisation 'would disappoint the "orthodox" Labour leader Tony Benn', the newspaper concluded ironically.<sup>7</sup>

It goes without saying that this is an issue as old as the history of socialist thought, which has been debated in Bologna and Emilia as well as in Great Britain in one form or in another since the earliest workers' cooperatives were founded (see Sassoon 2010: 5–26). Nevertheless, for the *Guardian*, 'The cooperatives [were] run on an unashamedly capitalist basis', but 'with the safety valve of democratic worker participation'. Furthermore:

<sup>6</sup> See also 'Regions and feuds in Italy', *The Economist*, 22 January 1949, pp. 148–9; Adam (1972: 785); Sassoon (2010: 83–168); and Cooke (2010: 1–112).

<sup>7</sup> 'Italy goes to the polls', p. 15.

[T]he 18 district councils put into practice the local party's belief in the need to decentralize power, even on a local level. The way it has been done in Bologna makes the PCI's stated policy of a shift from the centralised Russian model all the more credible and is certainly more realistic in European terms.<sup>8</sup>

'But *is it Socialism?*', *New Statesman* asked provocatively. 'Their programme is *ipso facto* revolutionary – the magazine declared – because no-one else anywhere in Italy has anything like it'. It concluded by using the words of an interviewer, but it seems that the journalist shared his opinion: "What we are doing, you see," said a young architect, "is making the revolution without chopping off people's heads" (Adam 1972: 785).

It is hard to draw a distinction between non-conflictual progression towards Socialism and a mere democratic political system in a capitalist society in which the single citizen must fight alone for his/her rights. In fact, the *Guardian* concluded that 'none of the PCI leaders in Bologna or elsewhere – admits to wanting a Communist Italy either now or in the future. Pluralism, and a country of many parties'.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The PCI between utopia and paradigm

British discourse on Italian communism depicted 'Red Bologna' and Emilian communism as a sort of 'exotic but reassuring oddity'. This fascination had even reached as far as pop culture and counterculture music. For example, in 1978, the first single of a post-punk group called Scritti Politti came out; the band's name was clearly (although not exactly) taken from one of the collections of Gramscian texts that was arousing a lot of interest in those years among the British radical left. The title of their song was 'Skank Bloc Bologna' (see Pearmain 15). The lyrics are rather ambiguous, but it seems that 'Skank Bloc Bologna' is what a girl dreams of, an idea perhaps. The song appears to suggest that what she is looking for could be located in Italy, and, if she succeeds in finding it, she might also find a way to break out from the dull lifestyle described in the first part of the song. From January to March 1981, the BBC broadcast a twelve-part adaptation of Giovanni Guareschi's *Don Camillo* (*The Little World of Don Camillo*). Although it is completely inappropriate to include Guareschi's saga in the mainstream communist narrative, it is nonetheless clear that his stories depicted Emilian postwar civic and political life in a sympathetic way (see Sassoon 2008: 1259–60 and Perry 2007). In addition, the *Festa de l'Unità*, a series of happening and events, mainly political, organised by the PCI to finance and spread its official newspaper *l'Unità* and in general its politics, was seen with a mixture of envy, admiration and sympathy. Left-wing British activists and adherents of the Communist Party of Great Britain who tried to emulate it but with less success, on the South Bank, in Coventry and in other parts of England, described the *Festa* as a sort of *divertissement*.<sup>10</sup> Although, according to *Interlink*, 'the clear intention of the Festival is to combine the "party political" with the culture of everyday life', the magazine concluded that 'you could spend a couple of hours each evening wandering around in a gastronomic delirium, scanning menus and trying to decide what to eat' (Osborne 1987: 5). *Marxism Today* also could not escape the appeal of Italian gastronomy:

By the 1970s, the one time display of party discipline and rigour had been translated into an extremely efficient organisation of a civil spectacle; political debate existed between gastronomic stands, television, rock concerts and films. (Chambers and Curti 1983: 41)

<sup>8</sup> 'Italy goes to the polls', p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> 'Italy goes to the polls', p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> See Tonelli 2012.



Parallel to the popular success of Emilian communism, scholarship and academic debate in the political sciences also seemed to be interested in the 'enigma' of Emilia's 'redness'. Apart from Brusco's aforementioned research on the Emilian model, early studies on Italian politics and the Italian Communist Party and its culture also started to circulate in the British academic field. By this point, the only texts available had been superseded, such as the translation of the research undertaken by the Istituto Cattaneo on electoral turnouts that set the terms of 'imperfect bipartism' but was little interested in the peculiarities of the PCI (see Galli and Prandi 1970). Starting from the early 1980s, Emilian communism stimulated interest in studies such as Keith Middlemas's *Power and the Party: Changing Faces of Communism in Western Europe* (1980) and David Childs's *The Changing Face of Western Communism* (1980). The first detailed account of Bologna's experience was published by the American socio-anthropologist David Kertzer (1980). Kertzer's book, harking back to a theme already tackled by the American social scientist Robert Evans, that of the coexistence of 'faiths' – religious and political – within the context of Cold War anti-communism, was based on fieldwork that the author conducted in 1971–2 and in 1976 in Albora, a small *quartiere* in the town centre of Bologna. The book delved into matters concerning the 'church–party', and the relationship between communist ideology, the PCI and the Catholic Church, and it investigated the pervasiveness of Italian anti-communism. The 'question of the PCI's duplicity' was also studied by Sydney Tarrow (1967: 39–53).

What is interesting here is that all these studies continued to repeat the pattern of 'surprise'. In his preface, Kertzer wrote: 'Associated with dark visions of totalitarianism and inevitably linked to Moscow, it is difficult for Americans to understand the appeal the Communist Party has in Italy'. Precisely because of their 'incredulity', therefore, these approaches tended to replicate a 'paternalistic' vision of Italian communism in which the communists are honest, great workers and generous about answering embarrassing questions. 'They had little to gain and potentially much to lose' – Kertzer documented – 'by allowing an outsider to pry into the most sensitive of their affairs' (1980: xix).

Another strand of the renewed interest in the Italian communist experience was Enrico Berlinguer's Eurocommunism and political experiment. There were studies published on the subject, such as Donald Sassoon's *The Italian Communists Speak for Themselves* (1978), or the book-interview put together by Eric Hobsbawm with Giorgio Napolitano, who was the PCI's spokesman for economy at that time (see Serfaty, Gray 1980). Sassoon, who grew up in Italy, wrote almost all of the articles published by *Marxism Today* on this subject (Sassoon 1983: 23–27; Sassoon 1984: 14–16; Sassoon 1985: 5–6; Sassoon 1986: 22–6; Therborn 1980: 14–20).

However, in all these studies, Bologna and the Emilia model have just a sporadic presence. It is the ideological transformation, the question of the 'historic compromise' (a controversial political alliance between Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the PCI, and the Christian Democrats led by Aldo Moro, which provided the PCI's external support to a Christian Democrat one-party government in the late 1970s), that attract far more interest. See, for instance, the *querelle* between Tobias Abse and Stephen Gundle in the *New Left Review*: while Abse blames the PCI for not adopting a combative secular stance at a time when increasingly wide sectors of society could have been mobilised in support of a potentially revolutionary communist manifesto, Gundle states that Berlinguer's design represented a bold attempt to formulate a response to the several cultural issues emerging from the crisis of Italian capitalism (see Abse 1985: 5–40 and Gundle 1987: 27–35).

This attention went hand in hand with the (re)discovery of Gramsci's thought. Encouraged by the publication of *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (1971) in English, British Gramsciology

was driven by a milieu of intellectuals such as Tom Nairn, Perry Anderson, the historian Eric Hobsbawm and, above all, Stuart Hall.<sup>11</sup> Intellectual categories such as 'war of position' and 'manoeuvre', 'civil society', 'subaltern mentalities', 'historic bloc' and above all 'hegemony' spilled over into the English debate. This trend in critical thinking was added to, as recalled by Andrew Pearmain, by 'the allure of Italy itself, the light and the heat, where people calling themselves Communists got elected to councils and Parliament and actually run things' (2001: 15).

#### 4. Red Bologna as a reference culture

What elevates Red Bologna and the Emilian model to a 'reference culture' is an 'independent variable': the affirmation of Thatcherism and Thatcher's local government reform which led to the abolition of the Greater London Council (1986). By reference culture here I mean a theoretical and empirical way of approaching the cultural dimensions of territorial and non-territorial power. In this perspective, ideas and ideological systems, their representation and actors travel across institutional and spatial boundaries, and are able to 'participate' in and 'mediate' the construction and reproduction of meaning and values (see Freedon 2012: 95–106; and Freedon, Vincent 2012).

'What does Red Bologna mean for Britain?' was in fact the title with which *Marxism Today* reviewed the book by Jäggi, Müller and Schmid. After an enthusiastic introduction on the structure of Bologna's administration, the reviewer, David Green, a communist activist from the London council of Hackney, turns his attention to the 'nature' of the Emilian PCI *vis-à-vis* the relationship between democracy and class struggle to which it had been able to draw attention. According to Green, the intertwining of class struggle and the fight for democracy is clear in Bologna's experience. Firstly, the overall presence of 'strikes and industrial actions over social and political issues as well as for better wages and conditions' points directly to the policy of extending democracy within the project of *decentramento*, namely, '[m]aking direct participation possible for an increasing number of citizens, without discrimination'. Secondly, he notes the extension of local control over planning: 'Development, traffic, retail are submitted to neighbourhood assemblies and discussed, altered, and interpreted by tens of thousands of citizens'. Finally, there is a 'revolutionary attitude to education which leads to the introduction of elements of Socialism into the education system, and mass involvement in health care, and welfare policy'. Green concludes that all of these 'extended democratic rights have increased the Bolognese willingness to struggle'. Accordingly, the supposed inclination to struggle and its romantic and epic 'glamour' seem to be the main contrast to the dominant political practices in Britain, even in those councils controlled by the Labour party: 'The general picture, outside the well-organised workplace, is one of the working-class alienation and non-involvement in politics – rather than one vibrant, combative struggle' as seen in Bologna, Green recalls (1978: 195–8).

The idea that achieving socialism is a process and that revolutionary strategy must be adapted to this process was assumed by Gramscian theory and had found its full realisation in Red Bologna's experience. According to Sassoon:

Bologna's significance rests in the fact that its achievements have not been the results of technocratic-Fabian decisions from the top, but of a framework of local democracy in which has [become] involved wider and wider strata of the population. [...] Here

<sup>11</sup> In April 1987, *Marxism Today* organised a major conference at the University of London on Gramsci, which produced a special issue 'Gramsci 87', *Marxism Today*, April 1987. For more on British Gramsciology, see Harris 1992; Forgacs 2002: 61–80; Carlucci 2013. For the impact of Stuart Hall, see Chen, Morley 1996; Davison, Sally; David Featherstone; Michael Rustin; Bill Schwarz 2017.



the dichotomy between leaders and the guided has begun to be broken. Thus in a context of unity-oriented struggle [...] the working population has begun its long struggle towards the assertion of itself as the new directing class of society. (Sassoon in Jäggi, Müller, Schmid 1977a: 27)

Starting from here, the Bologna example was used as a sort of 'textbook guide' from which policies, political activities, parts of the manifestos, ideas and vision were extrapolated. At a time when the hegemony of Thatcherism seemed impossible to defeat, at least at the national level, decentralisation and the case for a stronger regional and territorial dimension gained most attention. 'Power to the provinces!' exclaimed *Marxism Today*. 'In a situation in which national political power for a government of the working class seems currently unattainable, in any real terms, there may nevertheless be opportunity to achieve some stronger regional hegemonies' (Rustin 1983: 31). Furthermore, in a context in which 'central administration ha[d] been the Tories' principal method of cutting the cost of local government', the journal insisted that decentralisation might have been seen 'as a response to this process' and the potentiality of this new struggle's perspective as a 'means of combatting a widely-perceived lack of democracy in local government' (Page 1983: 4).

The decentralisation of struggle should have gone hand-in-hand with the enforcement of the second pillar on which the Emilia's miracle was based: the affluent and dynamic network of small and medium-sized industrial firms. By 'importing' the Emilian model, it would have been possible to reverse Britain's unstoppable 'decline' (Tomlinson 2009: 227–51). The political theorist Paul Hirst suggested, for example, that 'Britain needs to copy elements of the paths followed in both Sweden and Italy' (Hirst and Zeitlin 1988: 47). When Eric Hobsbawm highlighted Bologna's impressive figures – 'the sort of area to which, if it were in California, Thatcherite propaganda would be pointing to? as a model of go-ahead economy' (Hobsbawm 1983: 12) – Eric Heffer replied by underlining that 'on most issues, the PCI is more to the right than the Labour party' (Heffer 1983: 52). Even later, in 1988, while commenting on the Labour Party's policy review (a modernisation project wanted by Labour leader Neil Kinnock after a further defeat in 1987), Hobsbawm insisted: 'And who would not rather live in Bologna than in Basingstoke?' (Hobsbawm 1988: 34; see Thorpe 2008: 230–44).

Of course, the reality in Emilia-Romagna was less idyllic than had been described, but that is beside the point. What is striking is that, while Italian communism came to terms with its own failures (which were both national and local: the second wave of student protests in 1977 and the concomitant competition from the left by the extra-parliamentary groups and from the right by the new protagonism of the Partito Socialista Italiano), it had nonetheless become a 'reference culture'.<sup>12</sup> All this enthusiasm merged, finally, in Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council. When the GLC was abolished in 1986, the Bolognese flirtation also came to an end (see Bianchini 1987: 103–17; MacNeil 2002; and Pugh 2011: 353–86).

In recalling that experience, Beatrix Campbell and Martin Jacques state that the GLC had genuinely become a popular local authority: 'It was a different kind of Labour. [...] Their view of local government had been radicalised by writings like those of Cynthia Cockburn on the local state and *Red Bologna*' (Campbell and Jacques 1986: 6). The Labour party responded very slowly to the changing times and refused to accept that a new political and cultural hegemony could not be built on the radical policies of the past; thus, as for the Emilian PCI, which was not able to be 'expatriated' and take a leading role in the central party in

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Adrian Lyttelton, who knew Italian history and politics very well, had already recorded it: 'The image of the orderly city-state so successfully cultivated by the Communist administration had suffered a severe fracture' (1979: 798; see Colozza 2014).

Rome, Livingstone's experience also remained a minority one. *Marxism Today's* epitaph on London's experience stated: 'The politicians learnt from *Red Bologna*, but the trade unions didn't. In short, the GLC, an administration, was transformed, the Labour movement was not' (Campbell and Jacques 1986: 10).

### 5. The English way to Italian Socialism: final remarks

Different in terms of tone but not in substance, the Italy perceived by the British after the Second World War did not diverge much from the projection that started from the experience of the Grand Tour and later from the political chronicles on the Italian *Risorgimento* and Liberal Italy: it was a perception of a country that was calcified within the triangle 'beauty–corruption–inefficiency' (see Pfister 1996: 3–21). Intercultural perception is never simply a passive process, hence the construction of Italy and its representation that informed the British public debate of the 1970s and 1980s were based on a set of interconnected oppositions setting Italy up against Britain – 'Italianness' in terms of the difference from England and 'Englishness' rather than from British and Britishness, labourism and Fabianism from Gramscianism and communism, and so on. What I have called Red Bologna's reference culture follows the same pattern of cultural or national self-definition through emphasising difference from 'others', although here we have seen a process that reversed the terms of these traditional oppositions – Bologna's experience did not present elements of corruption or *familismo* or Machiavellian practices.

Until the late 1970s, Red Bologna and the so-called Red Belt had been identified as a positive model in contrast to the stereotypical description applied to the rest of Italy. However, this was a sort of exception whose function was more to reinforce the representation of the other Italy, the corrupt and inefficient one, rather than a model with which to compare it. It was actually Thatcher's revolution and, above all, the deep crisis of the left in the late 1970s and 1980s that transformed the model of Red Bologna into a feasible alternative: a non-conflictual class struggle capable of creating a 'new state' through a 'city-state' or at least a 'regional-state'. In Bologna and more broadly in Emilia-Romagna, the celebrated appeal of 'working-class struggle' and the romantic allure of the Italian *movimento dei lavoratori* (labour movement) had converged into an administrative solution and effective local politics and governance.

Within the debate on the renewal of left-wing political culture and the divided Labour Party, the experience of Emilian communism and Red Bologna were strengthened by Berlinguer's project of Eurocommunism and the 'third way', on the one hand, and, on the other, by the declination of Gramscian categories in the British political context. They represented a response, in terms of modernisation, to the challenges of the 'new times' whose driving force was incarnated by the project of *decentralisation*. During this discursive process of declination within the British context, however, the Bolognese experience of local democracy was stripped of its being a mere policy, and instead became a sort of self-determined 'ideology'. Yet, it was an 'old' ideology or, at least, an ideological project thought up for a different historical era, the Cold War, and unsuited to understanding the new political context of globalism and post-Fordism that was now challenging Britain and the British left.

The examples of Red Bologna and Italian communism were a sporadic presence within left-wing British discourse, and ceased to be a political alternative when the GLC was abolished. Although they remained part of popular culture for a while longer, today they seem to be more a sort of romantic and nostalgic image of the past without any other appeal, as shown, for instance, in a recent article in *New Statesman* on Cavriago (Reggio Emilia), the city that still maintains a statue of Lenin in one of its piazzas (Paradiso 2017).

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